



ETHEL BARRYMORE and CYRIL KEIGHTLEY

THE OFF CHANCE, the comedy by R. C. Carton in which Miss Ethel Barrymore is now appearing at the Empire Theatre, is like the same author's "Lord and Lady Alzy." Both plays are lineal descendants of the artificial English comedy that began with the Restoration playwrights and flowered anew a century later in Sheridan.

No spectator was expected for a moment to believe the intrigue in either of these plays. No more is he expected to believe Mr. Carton's fable in "The Off Chance." So long as it is an amusing contrivance, which it undoubtedly is, so long it serves. And it serves too as the frame upon which the playwright hangs his humorous situation as well as his lighter play of conversational wit.

Mr. Carton's wit seldom lapses into mere repartee. He can sketch character lightly, plausibly, detachedly; he knows his types; he is ready with embroidery and shading. "The Off Chance" is indeed a very pleasant play in the theatre, but it is the sauce of the production at the Empire that makes it piquant.

This, like many of Mr. Carton's other plays, was written especially as a vehicle for the playwright's wife, Miss Compton, a clever and popular actress of the London stage. Here the role of Lady Cardonnell fits Miss Barrymore well.

Twenty years ago Lady Cardonnell was the wild young wife of George Rainsford, a rising young British politician, selfish and puritanical. It is easy for the audience to imagine how she must have chafed in that ungenial relationship and with what joy she bolted straight into the arms of the charming, happy, worldly, generous, hony Jack Cardonnell—joy that even Venice in the rainy season couldn't dampen. She must have shed many tears over the little baby girl she was forced to leave behind, but even if she had stayed she could not have often felt that little nestling form in her arms, for she had been deemed too frivolous to bring up a child in the way the child of an eminent M. P. to be ought to go.

And now when the play begins the baby girl has grown up pretty and is a duchess, she and her dual husband have not left it off well together. The Duke of Burchester is very young—undisciplinary, he, as young dukes are apt to be. He has "gone on the turf," and his chief friend and adviser is Major Bagleigh, who lives by his wits. If all the duchess's father—now Sir George Rainsford, Bart., M. P.—were more selfish and more puritanical even than he was twenty years ago—and her stepmother had left the young couple alone maybe the Duke might have found the pal he hoped to find in his wife and things would have been different. As it is, things have gone from bad to worse and he has become entangled with Maria de Blanca, a professional dancer, for whom several rich young fellows have already ruined themselves, and the duchess, more jealous than she will admit even to herself, has left him and returned to her father's house. And now there is to be a meeting at which a reconciliation may be arranged.

The scene is the office of Mr. Brunson, solicitor. Comes first Major Bagleigh. He would rather like to get the Duke out of the dancer's clutches. A wife will leave more money in a man's pocket than a mistress—more money you find it's way into the pockets of his friends and well wishers. So he'll bring the Duke to the family powder, although he'll have a hard time doing it, for the Duke is eager to be off to Kempton for the Jubilee Handicap.

Next comes Sir George, portly and important, wanting a word with the solicitor before the others arrive. It is six months since his daughter left her husband after enduring much cruel treatment at his hands—not physical violence, of course, but cruel in the attempt to undermine and destroy her domestic and religious ideals. Well, now what is wanted? Reconciliation or divorce? Divorce? The idea is abhorrent to Sir George. But he himself once had recourse to that legal solution. Yes, he admits. Brunson—You probably know that the first Lady Rainsford has also for many years been married to—er—the other man?

Sir George—Yes, I heard so. Brunson—They recently came into the title. The other man is of mine. Yes, and Lady Cardonnell, is bringing Mr. Brunson a new and very important client, the well known American millionaire, Cornelius Jeffcott Bayne.

But to get back to the business in hand. The youthful Duchess and her stepmother arrive and soon after a clerk announces that the Duke of Burchester and Major Bagleigh have come and that the Duke says if they

on Coster Jim at 25 to 1. Then he goes off to order luncheon at the Carlton while Lady Cardonnell remains behind to see the Duke of Burchester, who has come back looking for his field glasses.

Lady Cardonnell—Here they are. Duke—I shall be late, thanks to these damned glasses, I beg your pardon.

Lady Cardonnell—Not at all. I like it. Running down to-day?

Duke—Hoping to.

Lady Cardonnell—Fancy anything?

Duke—I've got a cracker on Searchlight.

Lady Cardonnell—It won't be in the first three.

Duke—That's cheerful. I've saved over Fiddlershire and Running Horse.

Lady Cardonnell—They're no good.

Lady Cardonnell—Have you backed anything?

Lady Cardonnell—I've a monkey on the one that's going to win.

Duke—Which horse is that?

Lady Cardonnell—Coster Jim.

Lady Cardonnell—Ungrateful rot. You made it clear to me that I was a millionaire round your neck. Well, I removed the millstone; so my "disgraceful conduct" paved the way to your second marriage with somebody who suited you a great deal better. What's your grievance?

Sir George—What is my grievance? I was dragged into the vile purulence of the divorce court. Have you never realized that though the law gave me freedom it left me lonely?

Lady Cardonnell—As to the loneliness, you soon put that right. I don't blame you. But "lonely" is a word with a double edge to it. How about our girl, whom I haven't seen for twenty years?

Sir George—Whose fault is that? The verdict naturally and properly gave me the custody of the child.

Lady Cardonnell—Yes, and from what I can make out she's been in custody ever since.

Sir George—I have spared no pains to keep from her all knowledge of the baser side of life.

Lady Cardonnell—Yes, you have; and a pretty howling mess you've made of it.

Sir George—I don't understand you. Lady Cardonnell—Of course, you don't. But the great thing is you don't understand End. I heard her tell you so just now.

Sir George—End's relations with her husband are not happy—thanks to his conduct.

Lady Cardonnell—You mean she isn't happy with her husband, thanks to her relations?

Sir George—You are ignorant of the facts.

Lady Cardonnell—Oh, no, I'm not. I know every one of 'em. This boy and girl are both large print. Young Burchester hasn't had a chance. You married him to End, and then you started meddling and muddling.

Sir George—I deny it.

Lady Cardonnell—Oh, yes, you did. End has always had a distinguished

Lady Cardonnell—No. I am afraid I don't mean that.

Duchess—Have you no sympathy for me when I'm miserable?

Lady Cardonnell—As to my sympathy, you should have it, but unfortunately I've paid most of it into your husband's account.

Duchess—You defend Ronald? You think he's right to treat me as he does?

Lady Cardonnell—I don't say he's right, but I can quite understand his kicking the family apple cart to pieces, because I've been in the shafts myself.

Duchess—Can you excuse his desertion—and—Madame Maria de Blanca? Perhaps you think she might suit him better than I do. You seem to imply marriage doesn't matter.

Lady Cardonnell—Marriage is one of the best games for two that was ever invented. But both players have got to know the rules. Jack Cardonnell has been a good husband to me because I've studied all his little ways. Whenever he has a bad night the only thing I make hot for him is his cup of tea in the morning. And what's the result? Dear old Jack wouldn't change me for the whole front row of an Empire ballet.

Duchess—You reproach me, but you don't know Ronald.

Lady Cardonnell—I do know Ronald, and if you and I don't look sharp he'll be off to Vienna.

Duchess—What can I do?

Lady Cardonnell—You can answer a simple question. How much does your husband matter to you?

Duchess—How much?

Lady Cardonnell—Yes. You told him to go to her and he may have gone. Well, now, would you give your life and ninety per cent. of your soul to get him back?

Duchess—I—I—oh, heaven help me! Yes, I would! I would!

Lady Cardonnell—Well, that clears the air. Then for the next hour or two you must trust yourself entirely to me. Say what I tell you to say

Lady Cardonnell—And when you see him do you think you can keep tight hold of yourself?

Duchess—Yes, I know I can. I haven't got a dog's chance, but I've pulled myself together, and if he wins—as it's Bournemouth to a button he will—I will, I shall wish 'em luck and swallow my gruel.

Lady Cardonnell—You go and put a coat on.

Yes, she is going to take him to the elopers. He hurries away to prepare for the ride, and while he is out of the room enter Maria, come to pick him up as agreed. She and Lady Cardonnell have a little passage at arms, and when the Duke returns to the room he gives Maria to understand that he is through with her. She rushes out denouncing him as a "cad."

Duchess—Thank God, that's over. Now, are you ready? But first, who are you, anyway?

Lady Cardonnell (taking his arm and turning to go as the curtain falls)—I'm your mother-in-law!

The scene of the fourth and last act of the play is the bungalow up the river. When the curtain rises the old caretaker and his wife are preparing for the arrival of the new master. The previous owner has been in the habit of entertaining his lady friends there and they have been a very gay lot—evidently. The old servants had hoped that since the new master was not a lord he might be a gentleman, but they are doubtful of it since he has phoned that he is coming down with a "lady." She, of course, can't be his wife, for as the old caretaker says, "No man alludes to 'his wife' as a 'lady' unless it's got any respect for 'er."

The bell rings. Bayne and the Duchess have arrived. Bayne and the caretaker go to look the place over and in their absence the old housekeeper tries to tell the Duchess what sort of a house it is and urges her to leave before it is too late. The Duchess half listens and then, when she is about to follow her when Bayne returns just in time to stop her and remind her that her mother is coming—a bit of information that greatly surprises the servants.

Bayne and the Duchess have a little heart to heart talk, Bayne describing how Lady Cardonnell came to his rescue when he lay ill with typhoid fever and friends in Paris, and the Duchess telling of her misunderstanding with her husband. They have got to be very good friends when Sir George Rainsford is announced. The Duchess leaves Bayne to meet her father alone. Brunson is with Sir George and is inclined, of course, to be conciliatory, which Sir George is not. He demands to see his daughter at once. Bayne jolles him along, telling him a good many truths that hurt. Once, however, when Sir George says something unkind of Lady Cardonnell, Bayne flares up and warns Brunson he'd better talk Sir George away.

Sir George declares that he knows the Duchess has been drugged and brought to the bungalow in an unconscious state. Bayne sends for the Duchess, who promptly appears. Sir George starts to speak to her.

Bayne—On this side they call it drugged. Will you put him wise?

Duchess—I have not been drugged. The idea is silly.

Bayne—Did you of your free will accept my protection?

Duchess—Yes.

Bayne—Has anything happened to make you go back on me?

Duchess—No.

Bayne—No, what, End?

Duchess—No—Cornelius.

Sir George is amazed, but he makes a last ineffectual attempt to recall his daughter to her reason—as he supposes. Just as he is about to leave, Lady Cardonnell is announced. She greets everybody and teases Sir George a bit, and then sends Brunson out to bring in the Duke. After introductions all round, Lady Cardonnell turns the Duke over to Bayne.

Duchess—Of course, I know how things are between you and End. I had End's letter, you know, and I had chuckled me for good and all, and that she was giving herself to you. That is what it comes to.

Bayne—Why not? See here, Duke, you married End and all your rights were stated out according to law. Lady Cardonnell is announced. She greets everybody and teases Sir George a bit, and then sends Brunson out to bring in the Duke. After introductions all round, Lady Cardonnell turns the Duke over to Bayne.

Duchess—Good Lord, man, I can see all that. Of course, End is free to do exactly what she likes with herself, and if she thinks you're better worth her while than I am, God knows I shouldn't blame her.

Bayne—I don't know anything about you, but it's any odds you're a better all round chap than I ever was or could be—but let's take it that you're ahead of me in everything except one.

Bayne—What's that?

Duchess—You're not within a mile of being as keen about End as I am. I don't care what you say, I swear you're not.

Bayne—Not as keen about End as you are? Say, now, that deep, whole souled love of yours must have driven you plumb crazy—lifted you right off your feet and nearly landed you kicking a Venus.

Duchess—Yes, I know. You hit hard, sir, and you're quite right, but it is not a knockout blow because I'm not such a cad as to come here if I wasn't such a wiper off my soap.

Bayne—Is that so?

Duchess—I swear it is. Lady Cardonnell, you'll stand to that, won't you? The Venus is over.

Lady Cardonnell—Oh, yes, we've said goodbye to Maria.

Duchess—Well, now, End, here's Mr. Bayne and here am I, which is it to be? He asks you to go with him. I ask you—I beg you—to come back to me. I don't know why you should give me another chance, but if you could—by—George—Idly take damned good care you should never be sorry you gave it. Now then, it's up to you.

Bayne—I'd say that was a square deal. You've heard what he says. Is it you for him or for me?

Duchess—Ronald, I believe every word you've said, and I've begun to see that when things did go wrong with us, I was just as blind and wrong headed as you were, but you did give me the idea to-night that you had done with me and that everything was all over between us, didn't you?

Duchess—Yes.

Duchess—Well, then, after that I trusted myself to—er—Cornelius, and he hasn't failed me. Don't you think

can't get to business at once he'll chuck it—that he isn't going to kick his heels in a something lawyer's something waiting room."

Enter the Duke and Major Bagleigh. The Duke is boyish and impulsive, eager to get a bad quarter of an hour over with and be gone to the races. He greets every one pleasantly enough and consents to be seated and to have his hat taken, but wants it left in reach, as he may need it in a minute. At last after several little things that go down to business. Finally Sir George declares that the Duke must give up Maria de Blanca and "put it in writing."

Duke—I ought to make very pretty reading. I am to chuck Maria, and I suppose old Bays will have to go as well. A list of all my future pals, male or female, will have to be sent on to dear papa for his approval before I can ask 'em to dinner.

Sir George—You're showing temper again, Burchester.

Duchess—Showing temper? What the devil am I going to get out of it? A wife who says she hates everything I like and likes everything I've no use for?—he has been working me backwards into always thinking the worst of me. End, where do you come in over this? Do you want this precious document to be drawn up and signed?

Duchess (hesitating)—Yes.

Duke (rising)—All right—then I've done it. If you cared to play the game to-day—if you had said to me, "Look here, old chap, never mind who is right or who is wrong, we want a clean slate, so catch hold of the sponge and no one shall jog your elbow." I should have butted in on the wronged and we might have worked all through. As it is, if you want a separation you can have it.

Brunson—Duke!

Duke—Or if you prefer a divorce, I won't stand in the way.

Sir George—Burchester!

Duke—You can make out your list of pals—now you've done it you can stick it behind the fire, because I'll see the whole bag of tricks damned first! And that's my last word.

And out he flings, calling on the Major to follow him. The Major, however, remains to tell Sir George that Maria is going to Vienna that night and that the Duke, who has spread himself over the Kempton Jubilee without backing a single horse that got an outside earthly, comes the absolute purer he's sure to, she, who won't be satisfied with a lock of his hair, will just glide off, leaving the Duke behind with his nads. Furthermore, he (the Major) will do what he can to help it along, for he can find a better investment for the Duke than Maria. It is left that way, the Major promising as he goes blithely on his way to keep Brunson informed as to what happens. Sir George, too, after inviting Brunson to dine with him at the Gresham, is about to depart when Lady Cardonnell is announced. Sir George is greatly disturbed at the prospect of meeting his former wife, but Brunson shows him out another way.

Then enter Lady Cardonnell, a beautiful woman of the world with a way of expressing herself that shows she is familiar with the American million. She comes to meet the American millionaire Cornelius Jeffcott Bayne, who soon hurries in right on the dot, buys sundry castles and estates and a bungalow up the river and then hurries off again, after asking Lady Cardonnell and her husband to have dinner with him at his hotel, the Gresham, where he stops, "because the chef knows how to make corn beef hash."

After he has gone, Brunson tells Lady Cardonnell of the conference that has just taken place. Sir George was there, he says, and Lady Rainsford and "her"—his—the daughter.

Lady Cardonnell—You mean my baby. (Pause.) They said I deserted my baby. That was a lie, Brunson. My baby—bless her!—deserted me. They said I didn't know how to bring up a child. I was too frivolous. So they packed off to Aunt Emily's and near the edge when it all happened, and my baby's fingers might have held me back. But they snatched them away. Ah, well! We won't rake over the old dust bin. Why did they turn up here this morning?

Brunson tells her the story of the separation between the Duke and Duchess and how it is hoped Maria will go off to Vienna and leave the Duke behind. Lady Cardonnell expresses interest and wishes she might see the Duke some time without his knowing who she is. Then along comes Lord Cardonnell, a thorough man of the world, not handsome but charming and debonair, even if he has the gout—which he doesn't admit. He has just got a tip on the Kempton Jubilee and has put a thousand pounds

and do what I tell you to do. How do you feel about that?

Duchess—I don't know.

Lady Cardonnell—You think it's a large order? Of course the twenty years that divide us are twenty pounds extra on my handiwork. All the same, you might keep an eye on this—it can't matter to me what happens and when it's all over, Duchess, you needn't put me on your visiting list unless you like. But if I can pull things round I will—for the sake of a certain little baby girl who snuggled quite comfortably in my arms till the time came when she was taught to forget her mother—or only talk about her in whispers. (Slight pause.) Now, then, how is it to be?

Duchess—I'm going to trust you—mother.

Just then Bayne, the American millionaire, enters and hands Lady Cardonnell the copy of Bagleigh's character that he has promised her. She introduces him to the Duchess.

Lady Cardonnell—Are you doing anything this evening?

Bayne—Nothing that won't stand over if you say so.

Lady Cardonnell—I want you to bolt up with my daughter.

Bayne—But with the Duchess?

Lady Cardonnell—Yes.

Bayne—It would be a privilege. Duchess (much startled)—Mother, what do you mean?

Lady Cardonnell—The bolt is only on paper.

Bayne—That'll help some.

Lady Cardonnell—She's had a dust-up with her husband and he's got to have his ears boxed. She has known you secretly—and is going to place herself under your protection.

Bayne—That's dead easy.

Duchess—Yes, but I don't remember meeting you before.

Lady Cardonnell—Perhaps not. We saw something of each other at one time.

Duchess—Did we?

Duchess—Did we?—Yes, not very much. That wasn't my fault.

Duchess—Then will you tell me to whom am I speaking?

Lady Cardonnell (slight pause)—I'm your mother.

Well, of course, the Duchess will hear what she has to say and Lady Cardonnell tells her that she has overheard her discussion with the Duke.

Duchess—Then you're interested? Do you mean that you are sorry for me?

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Bayne—That's dead easy.

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Lady Cardonnell—Perhaps not. We saw something of each other at one time.

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